

## What does the devil look like?

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE BEEN re-reading a book called 'The Field of Sighing: A Highland Boyhood, by Donald Cameron'. It came out in 1966, and was written, I believe, not by any Donald Cameron at all but by the poet Alasdair Maclean (1926–94).

Among many beautifully written but largely fictional passages is one about how his mother died in childbirth. He describes how the men saw to the funeral, while the women stayed at home and burned the deceased's clothes and mattress.

The maid was only able to drag the mattress as far as the side of the house where the hayshed was, and failed to take account of the wind, with the result that the men returned from the funeral to find an inferno. "My grandmother was already in her seventies," writes Cameron/Maclean, "yet she ran to and fro, foaming at the mouth, directing operations like a demon. When I saw the old lady with skirts tucked up inside her long drawers, her face lacquered jet with ash and burning, I thought she was the big black Devil whom she had described so frequently and adequately over the years."

Quite so. In his posthumous book 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland' (1900), the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, established minister of Tiree, had devoted a chapter to the devil, beginning with these wise words: "Superstition, in assigning to the devil a bodily shape and presence, endeavoured to make him horrible, and instead made him ridiculous.

"For this no doubt the monkish ceremonies of the middle ages are, as is commonly alleged, much to blame. The fiend was introduced into shows and dramatic representations with horns, tail, and the hoof of one of the lower animals; the representation was seized upon by the popular fancy, and exaggerated till it became a caricature . . .

"One bad effect to be traced to the travesty is, that men's attention is diverted from the power of evil as the spirit that now worketh strife, lying, dishonesty, and the countless forms of vice, and the foul fiend is become a sort of goblin, to frighten children and lonely travellers."

So what, according to Gaelic tradition, does the devil look like? A granny with blackened face and her skirts tucked into her drawers? Campbell certainly points out that the exaggeration is not carried to the same lengths as in English – nothing is said about his having horns or a tail. Even if he appears as a he-goat, his horns don't inspire as much terror as the horrible bleating sound of his voice. But he often has a chain clanking after him.

This reminds me of his nickname *am fear a th' air an t-slabhraidh* ('the man that's on the chain'), which shows how he enters a house by coming down the pot-chain from out of the dense peat-smoke that lingers under the roof. But it might equally have to do with Mark 5: 4 and Luke 8: 29.

What's most striking about the devil in Gaelic tradition is that he loves changing shape, so a granny in her drawers is perfectly within the realms of possibility. I think it's partly a recognition that he is (as Campbell emphasises) a spirit, partly the result of a mingling of cultures. If he's a raven he may be Celtic or Norse. If he's a horse he is, I imagine, the Celtic water-horse; but Campbell points out that in Job 2: 2 Satan is described as 'going to and fro in the earth', while in Zechariah 1: 10 the prophet sees horses which, he are told, 'the Lord hath sent to walk to and fro through the earth'.

Similarly, if he's a pig it may be because of the Gadarean swine, into which Christ drove the devils which possessed the chained man of Mark and Luke. And if he's a goat it may be because the sin offering prescribed by Lev. 16: 10 and 21 consists of that animal (the 'scapegoat'). However, what the devil *doesn't* seem to appear as, except in hymns, is a snake, and that suggests that the Bible was by no means the main influence.

More often than not, the devil is a man with cloven hooves, and that points to Pan, who was half man, half goat.

Pan was god of pastures, flocks, herds and forests, and also the personification of the deity that pervades all things. What that suggests to me is that amongst the Greeks he was seen as supervising pastures and so on, while among their neighbours the Celts (whose gods were spirits of nature rather than managers of departments) he was the deity that pervades all things.

So Pan was pantheism, and if he turned into the devil hereabouts it makes sense. There's a legend that at the time of the crucifixion, just when the veil of the Temple was torn, a cry was heard sweeping across the ocean: "Great Pan is dead." By the masterstroke of His death, Christ had defeated the Antichrist, and the responses of the oracles had ceased for ever.

Typical of 'the devil as Pan' is a story about an old droving inn called *Taigh-an-Rìgh Luib nam Mart*, the King's House of Luib of the Cows, which was I think in Glen Dochart in Perthshire. One Saturday night, a group of young men are drinking and playing cards for money there. Heated by drink and ill luck, one of them begins to curse terribly.

No doubt remembering the reputation of cards as 'the Devil's Books', one man takes fright and stops playing, but the swearer boasts that he will keep playing even if the Enemy of Mankind himself joins in. Soon afterwards a swarthy individual steps into the room and asks if he can play. They agree, and he draws in a chair.

When the innkeeper comes in, he notices under the table that the stranger has hooves. He comes back with a big bowl of water and a bible, and says, *Tha mi fhéin a' smaoineachadh, a chlann, nach bu mhisd sibh a bhith air bhur baisteadh*. "I think, lads, it would do you no harm to be baptised." He sprinkles them with water in the name of the Trinity. And at the mention of the holy names, the stranger disappears in blue flames through the wall.

As proof of what had happened, it was pointed out for as long as *Taigh-an-Rìgh Luib nam Mart* remained standing that the part of the wall through which the Devil had passed could never be made watertight again.

Campbell offers different stories in which the devil appears in different guises. In one, a youth gets the Red Book of Appin from the devil and stands in a circle to protect himself. The devil, previously described as a gentleman, attacks the circle by turning first into a grizzled greyhound (*mial-chù riabhach*), then into a roaring bull, then a flock of crows (*sgòth ròcais*). When the cock crows he disappears.

The *taghairm* – the rite of summoning the devil which I described here last year – makes the devil appear in the form of a cat. When the magician Michael Scot wants to go to Rome he calls up the devil in the same way and rides him through the sky in the shape of a black horse. At Michael's death the devil (or his emissaries) waits in the shape of three ravens to carry away his soul. Something similar is said of a bigamous Rannoch freebooter – at his death he is carried off by three ravens.

Distinguished author, poet and **WHFP** reader Angus Martin from Campbeltown has sent me a devil story which he tells me is to appear in his latest book 'Herring Fishermen of Kintyre and Ayrshire', to be published before Christmas. It was given him by Tom Kelly in 1996. One night when the wind had fallen away and no headway could be made sailing, a Campbeltown skiff landed below Ru Stafnish, and the crew boiled a kettle on a driftwood fire and ate their sandwiches.

While seated round the fire in the dead of night, they were startled by the appearance of a tall stranger. Though uneasy, they greeted him in a friendly manner. "Can we help you? Where have ye come oot o'?"

He enquired after a man by the name of MacCorkindale in Southend, asking where precisely did he stay. The fishermen were able to tell him, and pointed him in the direction of Southend. The stranger thanked them politely and then, to their astonishment, disappeared up the cliff-face in a ball of flame.

Terrified, the crew at once relaunched the boat and set off for Campbeltown, rowing frantically. Back in town, they reported the experience to the police, who gave them the uncanny news that MacCorkindale had died in Southend just about the time of the mysterious encounter. It was said that, time and again, other fishermen would ply the crew with whisky in the hope of getting them to change their story, but none of them ever did.

The manner of the devil's departure in that story somehow reminds me of a much gentler anecdote told by John Gregorson Campbell. A shepherd in Benderloch sees a large bundle of ferns rolling down the hillside. In addition to the downward motion given by the incline it seems to have a motion of its own. It disappears down a waterfall. "Of course this was Black Donald; what else could it be?"

*Dòmhnall Dubh*, as I pointed out last time, is one of the devil's names; as for the bundle of ferns, some poor soul would have been collecting it for thatching his barn when the wind took it away.

Campbell suggests a typology of devil stories. He appears in bodily shape, says

Campbell, at meetings of witches; ‘at card-playing, which is the reading of his books’; when he comes to claim his prey (Angus Martin’s story being an example); and when summoned by masons or magicians. He is also apt to appear to persons ready to abandon their integrity; to haunt premises which are soon to be the scene of signal calamities; and to come in unaccountable shapes and in lonely places for no conceivable purpose but to frighten people.

It’s an interesting list. I think we can recognise different dynamics in it. One is divination – find the devil, and you will know where, when or to whom something awful is going to happen. Another is criminology – find the devil, and his friends will be those who do harm in your community. Another is psychology. The devil is a rationalisation of all the ill-understood fears and anxieties that beset us all. He is Psychosis.

Yet another is education. Tell stories about ‘the devil’s books’, and young people won’t take up gambling. A man called Niall na Buaile in the island of Coll saw the devil in a hollow called *Sloc an Tàilisg*, and swore that he was crop-eared (*corc-chluasach*). Why there? Well, the devil lives in a *sloc* – one of his names is *fear an t-sluic* – and, as Gaelic poetry repeatedly tells us, the game of *tàileasg* (probably backgammon) involved gambling with dice.

Since this whole belief structure depends on being able to recognise the devil when you see him, it’s not surprising that he has specific characteristics, notably animal hooves. In fact a dramatic tension is set up between this and the other significant thing about him – his ability to change shape at will. And it’s at this point that we remember we’re dealing with ceilidh-house stories. They are as much entertainment as belief system. Where the man playing cards in a Gaelic story has hooves, the man playing cards in a Hollywood movie has a black hat. But the *adults* in the audience know that the devil can change shape, and that the murderer may turn out to be the character we least expect.

But let me finish with another story. The tenant of the farm of Holm (beneath the Storr in Skye) and his wife go to bed leaving a pot full of indigo dye on the floor. The pig comes in and falls into the pot. The wife gets up to see what all the noise is about and discovers the pig’s blue (Campbell says green – *gorm?*) snout jerking out of the water. “The devil is in the pot!” she cries.

Her husband calls out to her to put the lid on the pot. Leaping out of bed, he sits on the lid to hold it down. His wife, deeply impressed at his quick thinking and bravery, says: *Is iomadh duine d’an dèan thusa feum a-nochd, a Mhurchaidh*. “It’s many a person you’ve done a favour to tonight, Murdo.”

Needless to say, when the squealing subsides they find that what they’ve drowned is not the Prince of Darkness but their pig!

**8 March 2002**